

News

CLEANING UP LEVEES COULD COST BILLIONS TO MEET STANDARD, THOUSANDS OF TREES WOULD BE REMOVED

By **Alex Breitler**
January 18, 2010
Record Staff Writer

STOCKTON - Here's how federal flood control officials say a levee should look: It should have no brush or trees, but only trimmed grass, extending 15 feet in both directions from the "toe," or bottom, of the levee.

Central Valley levees, then, need an awful lot of work.

Those who maintain local levees say meeting the new standard by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers could cost several billion dollars up and down the Valley, whose levees are lined by thousands of trees.

Failure to comply could make these levees deficient in the eyes of the Corps, resulting in a loss of funding for rehabilitation in the event of a flood. It could also lead to mandatory flood insurance for residents protected by the levees.

The Corps says it will not enforce the standard until at least 2012, when a new flood protection plan for the entire Valley is supposed to be finished.

Existing rules have been challenging enough for local officials, who have been working with landowners to remove not only vegetation but also structures that the Corps believes are too close to levees.

Levee engineer Chris Neudeck said the 15-foot standard is "the next step."

"It's a reaction to the (Hurricane) Katrina event," he said.

Solely from a flood-safety perspective, Neudeck said he'd like his levees to be free of vegetation, although that's not as important as the fundamentals: structural integrity, height and width.

Aesthetically, he said, the Corps vision of a levee is "terrible" for the public - boaters, walkers and the like.

"We're going to have a fight" from the public, Neudeck said.

Scorched-earth levees are not ideal for the environment, either. San Joaquin County birder David Yee said riparian forests of willow, oak and bramble are habitat for countless animals that have already lost most of their historic Valley woodlands.

"That vegetation is key to the whole ecosystem," he said. "All the birds, all the mammals, the insects and everything. It's just huge."

Mark Connelly of San Joaquin County's Flood Management Division said it's not clear whether the new Corps standard would lead to more problems with levee encroachments on waterways such as the Calaveras River and Bear Creek, where people's backyards snuggle up against the landside toe of the levee.

"We don't like (the new standard)," he said. "It's much more restrictive than the current policies in place."

Nearby levees affected by the Corps standard include the Calaveras and Bear Creek, and the San Joaquin River from Lathrop to Stockton - those protecting the sprawling Reclamation District 17.

Debate over levee vegetation and whether it helps or hinders flood protection has been going on for years. This year researchers are examining the roots of trees on heavily wooded Sacramento levees to determine if they penetrate through protective slurry walls. The Corps says its standards could change as the science evolves.

The cost of removing trees is high, not so much because of the work itself, but the requirement to mitigate under endangered species law, said Dante Nomellini, a Stockton attorney who represents RD 17.

Residents who live behind these levees would ultimately pay.

Nomellini says the Corps standard is "probably a prudent thing." Roots create paths for water to seep through the levee and encourage animal burrowing. The Corps also doesn't want vegetation to obscure signs that a levee may be weakening.

"The reason the Corps has the standard is because of their conclusion that the levee is less stable and less protective with vegetation on it," he said. "If you're a homeowner and we comply with the Corps standard, we ought to have a less risky situation, so we benefit there."

Contact reporter Alex Breitler at (209) 546-8295 or abreitler@recordnet.com.

[VISIT HIS BLOG](#)